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9 March 1966

TO: Recipients of Executive Memorandum #154 dated 7 March 1966

President Johnson, at a Cabinet Meeting on 4 March 1966, described the background and thrust of NSAM 341. This paper sets forth the general lines of the President's comments and should be attached to your copy of NSAM 341.

NSAM 341 was approved and promulgated in connection with the conduct of interdepartmental U. S. Government work abroad. By the nature of the structure of the U. S. Government, no one below the President is vested with authority to give overall direction, coordination, and supervision to overseas interdepartmental activities which continue to grow more and more complex. Overseas the ambassador has this general authority, but in Washington there has never been an organization directly comparable to the ambassador and his country team specifically authorized to guide overseas interdepartmental work from Washington.

NSAM 341 is an outgrowth of the State of the Union message of 1966 in which the President stressed the importance of modernizing and streamlining the Executive Branch. With that purpose in mind with regard to overseas operations, General Maxwell Taylor was requested to review his experiences as ambassador in South Vietnam in integrating the activities of several departments and to examine the operations of our Government in Washington to see whether we were properly organized to cope with complex overseas operations not only in Vietnam but anywhere in the world where our interests are involved. The basic task was to integrate the programs of a number of departments in the most effective way to attain U. S. objectives in the country or region involved.

General Taylor, assisted by several interdepartmental committees, completed his review and submitted a report which the President approved. NSAM 341 is the result of this work.

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- 2 -

There is nothing in the NSAM which changes the responsibilities of department and agency heads with regard to their own programs overseas or to their relations with the President. The NSAM merely sets up a mechanism through which every head of department or agency involved in overseas activities can participate effectively and in a timely manner in the formulation of decisions bearing on matters of common interest abroad. Any of these senior officials can carry an issue all the way to the President if he feels that a decision about to be taken is wrong. The President has instructed the Secretary of State to make it clear to the Executive Chairman of these interagency groups that they must arrange to invite participation by heads of departments or agencies who are not regular members whenever there are matters affecting them on the agenda of their interagency groups.

Arrangements provided by the NSAM are, in a sense, only clarifying, codifying, and regularizing good staff work. They are intended to be a help and a protection to all involved in the conduct of overseas responsibilities. The new arrangements are an important step in improving the conduct of our overseas business and all agencies and departments are asked to help the Secretary of State and the President in ensuring that the arrangements work.

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L. K. White  
Executive Director-Comptroller

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